

Chapter 8

Norway: Slow Shift Towards Differentiation

8.1 Education System

Pupils shall not normally be organized according to level of ability, gender or ethnic affiliation. (Education Act 2010)

In Norway, it is forbidden by law to make a permanent differentiation between students based on their abilities. Equity is a central thought in Norwegian education policy. In fact, ‘Equity in education is a national goal and the overriding principle that applies to all areas of education’ (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2008, p. 3). This also shapes the approach towards excellence in Norway. Little is organized and existing excellence programs typically focus on system, rather than individual student needs (Box 8.1).

Primary and secondary education are founded on the principles of equity and ‘adapted education’ for all pupils, in a school system based on the National Curriculum (See SIU 2013 and Ministry of Education and Research 2007).¹ Adapted education means that differentiation within the school does take place to some extent.² In practice, schools and teachers ‘accommodate both the physical and social

¹The education system is centralized. The Ministry of Education and Research (Kunnskapsdepartementet) is responsible for all levels of education.

²The principle of adapted education was introduced in government policy in 1987 and promoted as ‘an ideological guideline for school policy as well as a standard for all teaching with a particular reference to the variety of pupils in need of additional support. On the school level, adapted education included local curriculum programs adapted to the school’s culture, neighbourhood and community. On the individual level, the revision stated that adapted education should support the variety of pupils’ with appropriate and individual adapted challenges, included the challenges immigrants as cultural and linguistic minorities encounter in school’ (Fasting 2010, p. 182). This principle is ‘being used to promote the development of an education system which supports all pupils and their individual requirements without the need to classify them’ (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2009, p. 13).

Box 8.1: Norway – The Basics

- 5.0 million inhabitants
- Capital: Oslo
- Constitutional monarchy
- 19 provinces
- Conservative/liberal coalition in power

learning conditions as well as the learning content to the pupils' ability, skills and needs – not the other way around' (Fasting 2010, p. 182, see also Opheim 2004).³ Consequently, a basic feature of the Norwegian education system is the arrangement of extra support and special education as much as possible within the common compulsory school called *grunnskole* (Fasting 2010, p. 180), which lasts 10 years and ends with a national exam (IBE 2012, p. 12)⁴ (see Fig. 8.1). After this, most pupils move on to upper secondary school (*videregående skole*). This school provides another 3 years of general training or 4 years of vocational training (see Nuffic 2012, p. 5–6).⁵ Apart from these state schools, alternative education opportunities are rare but they do exist (Ministry of Education and Research 2007, p. 14) (Box 8.2).⁶

³The Differentiation project (1999–2003) was a national project initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research, involving all upper secondary schools in the country. 'The goal for the project was to develop and practice methods for learning that would ensure, as far as was possible, adapted training for each individual student. Each school decided themselves what types of strategies they wanted to try out. More than 1,600 different types of strategies for adapted learning took place during the project period' (Opheim 2004, p. 65). The project was not particularly successful though. Evaluation showed that 'while half of the teachers find the projects in their school interesting and useful, the other half find the differentiation projects unclear regarding criteria and goals' (ibid).

⁴In the national exam, 'pupils are required to take a centrally set written examination in one of three [sic] subjects: Norwegian, Mathematics, Sami or English. Every year it is decided locally which groups of students will take each of the four subjects. Pupils are told only a few days before the examination what will be their subject. The national exams are marked externally' (Eurydice 2014, chapter 5.3).

⁵There are 12 different programs students can follow at *videregående skole*, nine of which are more vocational in nature. Students can choose a specialist subject (*valgfag*). In the second year of upper secondary school, students following a general academic program can choose a direction in either the natural or social sciences in addition to their specialist subject (Nuffic 2012, p. 5). Students who finish their studies successfully are awarded *Vinemål for Videregående Opplæring* (Secondary School Certificate), which is comparable to the Dutch vwo diploma. In the vocational variant, students do 2 years of schooling followed by 1 or 2 years of practical training, leading to a *Fagbrev* or *Svennebrev* diploma, comparable to a Dutch mbo 3 or 4 diploma (Nuffic 2012, p. 6).

⁶There are some Christian schools and Rudolf Steinerskolen (anthroposophical). In total, there are about 150 private primary and lower secondary schools with almost 14,000 pupils (2.2 % of total), and about 75 private upper secondary schools with approx. 10,000 pupils (6 % of total).

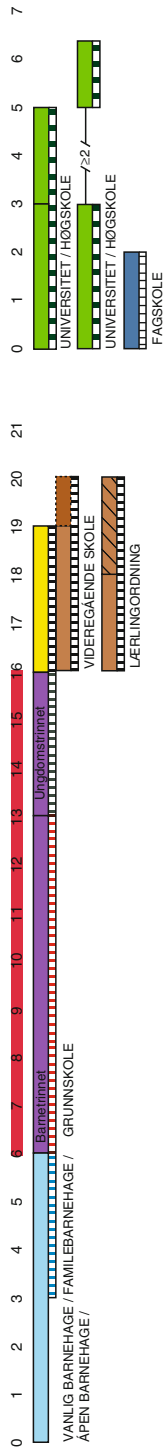


Fig. 8.1 Structure of the Norwegian education system (Eurydice 2014) see Fig. 3.1b for standardized legend

Box 8.2: Education in Norway

- Free at all levels
- Compulsory for 10 years from age 6
- Integrated primary school (*barneskole*) and lower secondary school (*ungdomsskole*) in 10-year *grunnskole*
- Three-year upper secondary education at *videregående skole*
- Higher education admission based on exam grades
- Ministry of Education and Research responsible for all levels of education

Norway has taken part in the PISA assessments of 15-year-olds since the early 2000s. The first results, in 2002, led to a ‘PISA shock’ as Norway scored average results: well below expectations (Haugsbakk 2013).⁷ This led to a massive restructuring of the teacher education system (Hammerness and Klette 2013).⁸ The 2012 results presented another disappointment, the overall score was around average among the OECD countries and performance in mathematics and science dropped (OECD 2013). The new government, dissatisfied with the results, announced action to improve results.

Generally speaking, some provisions exist for talented students in primary and secondary education.⁹ Pupils have the possibility to do their grade ten exam in a certain subject early, or to skip a grade. Talented secondary school students can also study at universities or university colleges in Norway. This is not an official program, but all upper secondary schools are expected to know about it and make appointments with the university or university college in their geographical area.¹⁰ Talented high school students can apply to take part in a regular university course together with regular university students and take the same exams. These university courses are taken in addition to the regular program in their upper secondary school. If they finish the course successfully, they receive a document and the credits can later transfer as university credits. Some universities advertise these possibilities

⁷Since then, results improved slightly. However, OECD researchers concluded that in spite of spending relatively large amounts of money on education, ‘Norway performs around average in mathematics, above average in reading, but below average in science. Norway’s mean performance in mathematics declined since the previous PISA assessment in 2009’ (OECD 2013, p. 1).

⁸In response to the 2002 PISA results, ‘educators and policy makers in Norway took a number of steps to improve the quality of teaching, to boost recruitment into teaching, and to increase respect for the profession of teaching’. Generally speaking, teachers for primary and lower secondary education are educated at university colleges, while for upper secondary school a university degree is needed. A 1-year pedagogy course is usually followed after taking a university degree.

⁹Outside the school system, Mensa (the international association for gifted people), has a Norwegian branch that is also meant for children. There is also an Association of Parents of gifted children and some parents who blog about gifted children and gifted education: some of these parents also organize activities. Goals of these activities are usually focused on the social level.

¹⁰Personal communication Grethe Sofie Bratlie, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Higher Education, February 2014.

prominently on their website, notably the universities of Oslo and Agder. They are also working together to prepare national guidelines on this subject.¹¹ In 2013/2014, the University of Oslo also offered a special mathematics course at university level for talented high school students (See University of Agder 2013; University of Oslo 2014). Some universities have programs involving university staff teaching at high schools, or high school students can incidentally visit universities.

Admission to Norwegian universities is a complicated process, partly dependent on grades. Students who follow a general training path at the upper secondary school will take exams that lead to general university admission certification, called *generell studiekompetanse*. This diploma is a requirement to be admitted to universities, but it does not guarantee placement (SIU 2013; Ministry of Education and Research 2007).¹² Students who want to enter university must apply at the national coordination centre, called Norwegian Universities and Colleges Admission Service or *Samordna Opptak* in Norwegian. This institute admits students to study programs based on a point scale, with the highest ranking students offered a place until the study program is full. Points are awarded based on average grades from upper secondary school, but additional points can also be awarded for various reasons such as language proficiencies, gender (for a select number of studies) or completed military service. A number of seats are offered without using the point scale. Admission to some programs is highly competitive (Samordna Opptak 2013). In addition, universities or university colleges may set additional requirements for candidates, depending on the particular program (Nuffic 2012, p. 8).

The Norwegian higher education system has developed rapidly in the last decade (Nyborg 2007¹³). The Bologna Process has been combined with extensive reform and development of the whole tertiary education sector (Bakken 2013¹⁴). There are now institutions at three levels: universities, specialized university colleges and 'general' university colleges (accredited and non-accredited, see Box 8.3). At the

¹¹ Personal communication from Bjørn Monstad, Director of Academic Affairs University of Agder, March 2014. The University of Agder has an official program linking secondary and university education since 2013, but already in 2009 a few gifted students from upper secondary school followed courses at the university.

¹² There are also different ways of entry: Pupils with vocational education and training may qualify for admission to universities and university colleges by taking a 1 year supplementary programme leading to general university admissions certification (SIU 2013). Another route, closely related to the principle of equity, is through the law of 23/5. This means a person above 23 years of age who has 5 years of combined schooling and work experience and has passed exams in Norwegian, mathematics, natural sciences, English and social studies can enter higher education (SIU 2013). Persons over 25 can also enter 'on the basis of a documented combination of formal, informal and non-formal competence' (Ministry of Education and Research 2007, p. 16).

¹³ Nyborg provides an overview of the history of higher education in Norway.

¹⁴ The process started in 2002, with the reformed Universities and Colleges Act, which is also known as the Quality Reform. This act 'introduced institutional accreditation through the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) and thus opened up an opportunity for any institution to qualify for any institutional category, as long as it successfully passes the accreditation process and demonstrates compliance with the relevant standards' (Bakken 2013). See also Ministry of Education and Research 2009.

time of writing, there are about 250,000 students in Norwegian higher education, distributed between 75 institutions (Statistics Norway 2013, p. 6; Bakken 2013).

Box 8.3: Higher Education Landscape

- 8 universities, which have the right to establish programmes at all levels
- 9 specialized university colleges, which have the right to establish study programmes at all levels within their majors
- 36 accredited university colleges, which have the right to establish study programmes at bachelor level
- 22 non-accredited and mostly very small colleges of higher education

The four traditional and major universities are located in Oslo, Bergen, Tromsø and Trondheim. Oslo University is by far the oldest and largest university, founded in 1811. It is also the Norwegian university featuring most prominently on world rankings.¹⁵ Since 2003, four specialized institutes and university colleges converted into a full university,¹⁶ which means Norway has eight universities at the moment. Apart from the universities, there is an extensive network of university colleges. Broadly speaking, the nine specialized university colleges work at the national level, while the 36 accredited ‘general’ university colleges mostly focus on their region.¹⁷

8.2 Culture and Policy Towards Excellence

Equal opportunities to complete education are a prerequisite if we are to sustain and further develop the welfare state on the basis of the Norwegian model, with minor social differences between people. (Ministry of Education and Research 2009)

These are the first words of the Education Strategy of the Norwegian government, as approved by parliament in 2009. As said before, equity is a central thought in Norwegian education policy. This can be seen as successful to some extent.

¹⁵Oslo University is at place no. 69 in the Shanghai ranking and 182 on the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2013–2014. The other two Norwegian institutes featuring prominently on these lists are Bergen University, found at place 201–225 of the Times List and 201–300 on the Shanghai Ranking, and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim (201–300 Shanghai, 251–275 Times).

¹⁶According to Bakken (2013), the portfolios of the new universities ‘are still dominated by large professional programmes (teaching, nursing, engineering, etc.) and relatively few of their students follow master degree programmes. Programme diversity has increased in each individual institution, while the institutions in many ways have become more similar. So the development is towards increased diversity within institutions and diminished diversity among institutions.’

¹⁷These colleges came into existence after the university college reform in 1994, with the goal of giving every county a higher education institution. They are commonly known as *høgskole*.

Norway scores high on equity in the 2012 PISA report (OECD 2013, p. 1).¹⁸ It also scores relatively well among European countries on resilience (ibid, p. 4)¹⁹ and on other social factors (Bakken and Elstad 2012²⁰).

But there are also other consequences. The focus on equity and fear of elitism are problematic for gifted students. University of Stavanger researcher Dr. Ella Cosmovici Idsøe sees this as a major problem: ‘Even though many national and international investigations on Norwegian students show that they are not stimulated and challenged enough in school, this is still a taboo topic. (...) There is no definition or normative identification criteria for gifted learners, there is no focus on the needs of these children in schools or teacher training programs and there is a lack of research on this topic’ (see also Udberg-Helle 2013, p. 4) (Box 8.4).²¹

Box 8.4: Local Terminology

The word ‘honors’ is rarely used in Norway. Local terms used to refer to (programs for) talented and gifted students include:

- *fremragende utdanning* (excellent education)
- *evnerike barn* (gifted children)
- *vitebegjærlige barn* (‘inquisitive children’)
- *skoleflinke barn* (academically strong children)
- *høy begaved* (highly gifted)
- *eliteprogramm/eliteutdanning* (elite education)/*elitelinje* (elite line)

Traditionally, student recruitment in Norway primarily emphasized universal access rather than excellence and attracting talented students. But this approach slowly changed after the 2002 Quality Reform (Frølich and Stensaker 2010). In the early 2000s, the government concluded that one of the results of the equity approach was a lack of top teaching and top research.

Focus was first on excellent research and then moved to excellent education. As a first step, the Research Council of Norway initiated a program to identify Centers of Excellence in Research (SFF, *Senter for Fremragende Forskning*). The intention

¹⁸ ‘A relatively small part of the variation of performance can be attributed to differences in students’ socio-economic status’ (OECD 2013, p. 1).

¹⁹ ‘In Norway, 22 % of disadvantaged students are “resilient”, meaning that they beat the socio-economic odds against them and perform much higher than would be predicted by their background’ (ibid, p. 4).

²⁰ See Bakken and Elstad 2012 for more information on this subject and a review of the consequences of the 2006 law reform.

²¹ Personal communication, December 2013. See full interview in Appendix 4. Apart from Idsøe, researcher Udberg-Helle also concludes that ‘most Norwegian teachers and politicians have little general knowledge of what it means to be a gifted student. (...) They appear to hold a certain assumption which is based solely on their own experiences, not on factual knowledge’ (Udberg-Helle 2013, p. 4).

was to bring more Norwegian researchers and research groups up to a high international standard. There have now been three rounds in which Centres were identified and awarded extra money.

Following a successful evaluation of this SFF program, the Ministry of Education and Research started a similar program in education. It established the Centres of Excellence in Higher Education (SFU, *Senter for Fremragende Utdanning*) program in 2010.

The SFU program, managed by quality assurance agency NOKUT, is a prestige arrangement for educational activities in higher education. The overarching aim of the SFU program involves contributing ‘to the development of excellent quality in higher education and to highlight the fact that education and research are equally important activities for higher education institutions’ (NOKUT 2013) (Box 8.5).

Box 8.5: Key Players in Excellence

The following institutions are the most important players in the field of talent and excellence in education:

- Ministry of Education and Research
- NOKUT – the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education – an independent government agency that contributes towards quality assurance and enhancement in higher education and tertiary vocational education
- Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (*Universitets- og Høgskolerådet*) – the co-operative body for higher education institutions in Norway

The SFU program started in 2010 as a pilot project with one centre. In an evaluation, researchers concluded that Centres of Excellence are ‘welcome (...) in a field receiving comparably few prestigious national measures to ensure a systematic foundation of high quality practices’ (Carlsten and Aamodt 2013, p. 9). In 2013 a new round of applications was held. NOKUT received 24 bids, and finally three new Centres of Excellence were identified. Each centre receives a top funding of NOK three million (about 350,000 euros) annually for a 5-year period, which can be extended for another 5 years upon successful evaluation. One of the programs receiving SFU status is the BioCEED program at Bergen University. This program provides students experience with theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and socially relevant tasks throughout their studies. There is room to experiment with new educational forms. Program Director Vigdis Vandvik thinks the most important implication of the new status rests in the extra leverage. ‘The status gives us better credibility in the university and we collaborate more with the other biology institutes. It’s easier to make things happen and to experiment’.²² SFU Program Director Helen Bråten adds that a main aim involves stimulating the best to develop further and innovate. At the same time dissemination remains important in the program, as

²² Personal communication from Vigdis Vandvik, Director BioCEED Centre of Excellence at University of Bergen, January 2014. See full interview in Appendix 4.

does showcasing best practices and having others adopt and assess outcomes to help prove program success in attaining goals. ‘We want the Centres to disseminate both internally, within their organization, but also regionally, nationally and internationally, hence enhancing quality in education across the sector. The new Centres are progressing quite fast, I think, so that is promising’.²³

It should be noted that the Centre of Excellence programs are aimed at the institute level and not at the level of individuals. For example, there are no additional admission requirements for students that are taught in Centres of Excellence in Higher Education, thus upholding the equity principle. According to Education ministry Deputy Director General Grethe Sofie Bratlie, until now ‘research is the way of taking care of talented students’. The universities try to guide them into research and to pick them up as Ph.D. students. The government has financed quite a few Ph.D. programs for talents.²⁴

8.3 New Developments

Three recent developments might lead to a change in the approach towards excellence.

Firstly, a new government took office in October 2013. The centre-left government has been replaced with a centre-right government, led by Erna Solberg of the Høyre party. This party is not opposed to using the word ‘elite’, as in fact it has a tradition of an ‘elite program’ for its most-promising young members (Unge Høyre 2013). Within 2 weeks of taking office, the new Education minister Torbjørn Røe Isaksen commented about gifted children in an interview for state television news NRK, ‘We must learn that gifted children can have big challenges and may need help (....) We are very busy with this problem and will handle it. The first thing we shall start with is to make the specific problem known’ (Engen and Osterud 2013, own translation²⁵).

In January 2014, the new government announced its plans for higher education (Ministry of Education and Research 2014). Focus is placed on quality. Financing and structure will be reviewed and more focus will be placed on teacher education. A long-term plan for higher education and research is announced for late 2014. This can be seen as a significant shift.²⁶

²³ Personal communication from Helen Bråten, Project Manager SFU at NOKUT (Norwegian Accreditation Agency), February 2014.

²⁴ Personal communication from Grethe Sofie Bratlie, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Education, February 2014.

²⁵ A discussion about the subject of excellence in education also broke out in Norwegian media. In an opinion article on the NRK website, one of the directors of the group *Lykkelige barn* (happy children) was critical about the ‘fear of elitism’: ‘Today, Norway and Sweden are the only two countries in Europe where the silence about giftedness has been almost total over many decades. One can of course be tempted to speculate about the reasons. Have we stopped talking about unequal learning conditions out of fear that we say something about the ‘worth’ of a human being at the same time? Has the fear of elitism lead to us putting a lock on this discussion?’.

²⁶ Personal communication from Grethe Sofie Bratlie, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Education, February 2014.

Second, a sense of disappointment exists with the overall 2012 PISA results. The minister commented that ‘we must have higher ambitions than to be in the middle among the OECD countries (...) We must be better at helping those who perform weakly, and at the same time we must lift up more students to the highest levels’ (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2013, own translation). The Oslo City Council also recognized the problem of few high-performing Norwegian students and adopted a talent strategy in 2013.²⁷

Third, the further development of the SFU program might lead to more innovation in higher education in general and experimenting with new forms of education for talented students in particular.

Along with these developments, the newly-established Nordic Talent Network (2013) might form a platform for more effective lobbying towards the government.

8.4 Honors Programs per Higher Education Institution

We found no honors programs at Norwegian higher education institutions fitting our definition. However, there are some other provisions for talented students worth mentioning.

Students in Norway can apply for one-time allowances or scholarships, for example, to study abroad. Private institutes providing scholarships often do have a tough selection process.²⁸ Some Norwegian HEIs participate in international programs, such as Erasmus Mundus and the Nordic Master program. The Norwegian School of Economics (NHH) takes part in a number of international programs (Double degree and CEMS-MIM), which were described in part I.

In addition, for some institutes admission is highly competitive, especially art schools and universities. For example, at Bergen Academy of Art and Design ‘we could have several hundred applicants to forty-five seats in a program. As an average we have five to six times the number of applicants compared with the number of openings’.²⁹ The same goes for Oslo’s School of Architecture and Design. ‘Admission to AHO is highly exclusive, e.g. for Master of Architecture there are 2,000 applicants for less than 100 seats. You obviously need to be both talented and motivated to get in, but it is still a “regular study program”’.³⁰ At the Norwegian Academy of Music, ‘almost all our students are talented and the whole institution is oriented towards educating talented students. We have very strict admission proce-

²⁷ Information on the Oslo City Council talent strategy can be found on www.ivarjohansen.no/dmdocuments/talenter.pdf and www.bystyret.oslo.kommune.no/getfile.php/bystyret%20%28BYSTYRET%29/Internett%20%28BYSTYRET%29/Dokumenter/Bystyrets%20forhandlinger/2008-2013/20131004_April.pdf

²⁸ For example the Sons of Norway foundation that has some scholarships available for Norwegians wanting to study in North America.

²⁹ Personal communication from Ingjald Selland, Director of Academic Affairs Bergen Academy of Art and Design (KHiB), February 2014.

³⁰ Personal communication from Erling Rognes Solbu, International coordinator Academic Services at Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO), February 2014.

Table 8.1 Universities and specialized university colleges in Norway

Higher education institution	Webpage	No. of students ^a	Honors education offer
<i>Universities</i>			
University of Oslo (UiO)	Uio.no	27,100	No
Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)	Ntnu.edu	22,043	No
University of Bergen (UiB)	Uib.no	14,257	No
University of Agder (UiA)	Uia.no	9,824	No
University of Stavanger (UiS)	Uis.no	9,530	No
Arctic University of Norway (UiT)	Uit.no	9,436	No
University of Nordland (UiN)	Uin.no	6,009	No
Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB)	Nmbu.no	4,344	No
<i>Specialized university colleges</i>			
BI – Norwegian Business School	Bi.no	20,000**	No
NHH – Norwegian School of Economics	Nhh.no	3,468	No
Specialized University in Logistics (HiMolde)	Himolde.no	2,242	No
Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (NIH)	Nih.no	1,383	No
MF – Norwegian School of Theology	Mf.no	950**	No
Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH)	Nmh.no	660	No
Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO)	Aho.no	618	No
Oslo National Academy of the Arts	Khio.no	502	No
School of Mission and Theology	Mhs.no	350**	No
Bergen Academy of Art and Design	Khib.no	330	No
Total		133,046	

^aSource: Statistics Norway 2014 (numbers for 2012) for all HEIs except the ones marked with**. These are private institutions. Numbers are taken from the institute's own web pages (February 2014). To compile this table, first the websites of all universities and specialized university colleges were searched with keywords to find honors programs. Then they were all approached by e-mail and asked if they had any special provisions for talented students, matching our working definition. All institutions replied

dures and up to forty-fifty applicants for each seat for some of our programs'.³¹ Finally, the Oslo National Academy of the Arts offers 'a small number of highly competitive programs, each in specialized fields of the arts. We receive many more qualified applicants than our yearly admission quotas permit us to accept. We put all applicants through rigorous tests and we interview a large portion of the applicants each year. The result is a limited number of highly motivated and gifted students who are offered programs that are all very challenging and demanding'.³²

Table 8.1 presents an overview of universities and specialized university colleges in Norway, ordered by size (measured in student numbers).

³¹ Personal communication from Kjetil Solvik, chief of studies at Norwegian Academy of Music (March 2014). The Norwegian Academy of Music is also in the SFU program with its Centre of Excellence in Music Performance Education.

³² Personal communication from Torben Lai, Head of Academic Affairs, Oslo National Academy of the Arts (March 2014).

No honors programs have been developed in Norway yet, but the SFU program and the new government's intentions are incentives to develop further in this respect.

In the next chapter we will see if development is also occurring in neighboring Sweden.

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³³ **Note:** Literature used to prepare this book is included on this list. Some of the entries are in local languages and have not been read completely by the researchers. Instead, they have been searched with keywords to retrieve relevant information.

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